

JULY 20, 1976

"A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS" BY ABRAM TERTZ  
(ANDREI SINYAVSKY)

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES  
... FROM THE BOOKSHELF ... A SERIES IN WHICH WE REPORT ON  
BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY, JOHN ALBERT'S  
REPORT ON "A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS" BY ABRAM TERTZ, PUBLISHED  
BY FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX.

HERE IS BOOK EDITOR \_\_\_\_\_.

EDITOR: ABRAM TERTZ IS THE NOM DE PLUME (PEN NAME) OF THE SOVIET  
DISSIDENT WRITER ANDREI SINYAVSKY, WHO, TOGETHER WITH YULI  
DANIEL, ATTRACTED WORLD-WIDE ATTENTION WHEN THEY WERE PUT  
ON TRIAL FOR PUBLISHING THEIR WORKS OUTSIDE THE SOVIET UNION.

"A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS" DEALS WITH THE SIX YEARS  
SINYAVSKY SPENT IN A SUCCESSION OF SOVIET FORCED LABOR  
CAMPS. BUT, AS THE ABLE ENGLISH TRANSLATOR, MAX HAYWARD  
POINTS OUT IN A FOREWORD, THIS BOOK IS NOT JUST ANOTHER  
DESCRIPTIVE NARRATIVE OF LIFE IN PRISON. IT IS BASED  
ALMOST ENTIRELY ON LENGTHY LETTERS WRITTEN BY THE AUTHOR  
TO HIS WIFE MARIA TWICE A MONTH -- ALL THAT WAS ALLOWED  
UNDER THE REGULATIONS. THE FORM OF THE WRITINGS IS  
RATHER THAT OF A DIARY WITH NOTES OF THE AUTHOR'S OWN INNER  
PREOCCUPATIONS DURING HIS LONG SOJOURN IN WHAT HE CALLS THE  
"HOUSE OF THE DEAD." THE PREDOMINANT THEME, FROM WHICH  
NOTHING DISTRACTS THE AUTHOR FOR LONG, IS ART IN ALL FORMS.  
SINYAVSKY WAS BUILDING FURNITURE IN A FACTORY DURING THE  
DAY AND HUDDLING IN THE FREEZING COLD AT NIGHT, BUT

EDITOR: HIS MIND DEALS WITH SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET, WITH SOPHOCLES,  
(CONT'D) GOGOL AND PUSHKIN. AS HE WRITES IN ONE OF HIS LETTERS:

VOICE: "DRIVEN INTO A CAGE, THE MIND IS FORCED TO BREAK OUT INTO  
THE WIDE OPEN SPACES OF THE UNIVERSE THROUGH THE BACK  
DOOR."

EDITOR: THE "CHORUS" IN THE BOOK CONSISTS OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD  
WHICH THE AUTHOR ONLY RARELY LETS INTRUDE INTO HIS INNER  
THOUGHTS -- THE JAILERS AND FELLOW-PRISONERS WHOSE  
INCOHERENT LITTLE REMARKS ARE JUXTAPOSED IN THE BOOK  
WITH THE DIARY NOTES THEMSELVES. THE OVERALL EFFECT IS  
DRAMATIC. THE AUTHOR WRITES NOTHING DIRECTLY ABOUT LIFE  
IN THE CAMPS -- WHICH THE CENSORS WOULD NOT PASS -- BUT  
STILL MANAGES TO CONVEY A PICTURE OF A MAN WHO TRIUMPHS  
OVER JAILERS WHO SIMPLY CANNOT REACH HIM IN THE ROMANTIC  
WORLD HE HAS CREATED IN THE MIST OF STARK REALITY.

THE BOOK IS ROUGHLY DIVIDED INTO SEVEN PARTS -- ONE FOR EACH  
OF THE SIX YEARS THE AUTHOR SPENT IN DUBROVLAK, AND A  
SEVENTH RECORDING FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND THOUGHTS WHEN HE  
RETURNED TO HIS HOME IN MOSCOW. IN THE MIST OF OBSERVATIONS  
ON ART AND OTHER WRITERS WHICH HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH  
HIS PRISON LIFE, SINYAVSKY MANAGES HERE AND THERE TO  
INSERT A MOVING PERSONAL THOUGHT. HE WRITES TO HIS  
WIFE IN MAY 1966:

VOICE: "DON'T BE TOO SAD, MY DEAR. BY THE WILL OF FATE WE HAVE  
BEEN TRANSPORTED BACK TO THAT PALE-GREEN, ROMANTIC TIME  
OF LIFE WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE DECLARE THEIR FEELINGS IN  
PASSIONATE LETTERS, SWEAR ETERNAL LOVE, PLAN THE FUTURE

VOICE:  
(CONT'D) LIFE IN COMMON AND SIGH OVER PHOTOGRAPHS OF EACH OTHER ...

HAVING SO MUCH TO LOOK BACK ON, WE CAN NOW ADD TO PAST  
MEMORIES ALL THE TREMBLING HOPE AND BASHFULNESS THAT GO INTO  
THE FIRST WORD, SPOKEN SHAMELESSLY, WITH A SOB: MY  
LOVE."

EDITOR: HE REFERS BRIEFLY TO HIS ACTUAL LIFE BY WRITING:

VOICE: "IN OUR SLEEP WE ARE CONFINED TO A MINIMAL CELL  
PRECISELY CONTINUOUS WITH THE BODY, BUT WHERE DOES THE  
SPIRIT ESCAPE TO IN THIS RESTRICTED SPACE? IT WANDERS  
NOT SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE US, BUT RETREATS DEEPER INTO  
OURSELVES ..."

EDITOR: IT IS NOT ALWAYS A MATTER OF GREAT CONSEQUENCE ON WHICH  
THE AUTHOR LETS HIS MIND ROAM, AS WE LEARN IN THIS  
RECITAL ABOUT BUTTER AND CHEESE:

VOICE: "I NOTE A STRANGE NEW FEELING OF FASCINATION -- ALMOST  
ROMANTIC I'D SAY -- ABOUT A SPOONFUL OF BUTTER OR A SMALL  
SLICE OF CHEESE. IT FLOWS DOWN INTO YOU AND BECOMES  
INSTANTLY AND WHOLLY ABSORBED BEFORE IT EVEN HAS TIME TO  
REACH THE STOMACH, IT WOULD SEEM ... ONE SMALL MORSEL IS  
ENOUGH TO REVITALIZE YOU BEYOND MEASURE, ALMOST GOING  
TO YOUR HEAD."

EDITOR: AGAIN AND AGAIN THE AUTHOR CONTEMPLATES THE PASSING OF TIME  
IN A LABOR CAMP.

VOICE: "PSYCHOLOGICALLY, LIFE IN A LABOR CAMP IS LIKE TRAVELLING IN A LONG-DISTANCE TRAIN; THE AUTOMATIC FORWARD MOVEMENT OF TIME CREATES THE ILLUSION THAT AN OTHERWISE EMPTY EXISTENCE IS BEING FILLED AND MADE MEANINGFUL ... AGAIN AS IN A TRAIN, THE PASSENGERS DO NOT FEEL PARTICULARLY CALLED ON TO OCCUPY THEMSELVES WITH USEFUL WORK SINCE THEIR JOURNEY IS ANYWAY JUSTIFIED BY THE STEADY IF SLOW PROGRESS TOWARDS THEIR DESTINATION."

EDITOR: THE THOUGHT OCCURS TO HIM THAT MEN IN PRISON MAY EVEN BE HAPPIER THAN OUTSIDE IN FREEDOM WHEN HE WRITES:

VOICE: *OP T.* "IT SOMETIMES SEEMS TO ME THAT IN THESE CONDITIONS OF SIMPLY WAITING FOR THEIR SENTENCES TO END, MEN MAY BE HAPPIER THAN THEY ARE LIVING IN FREEDOM -- ONLY THEY HAVE NOT QUITE GRASPED THE FACT."

EDITOR: IN HIS FLIGHT FROM REALITY SHYAVSKY ALWAYS RETURNS TO ART AND ITS DEFINITION.

VOICE: *OP T.* "ART IS AN ATTRIBUTE OF INDIVIDUALS, OF NATIONS, OF EPOCHS AND OF HUMANITY AS A WHOLE, LIKE THE INSTINCT OF SELF-PRESERVATION. IT IS INHERENT, TOO, IN LIFE GENERALLY, IN EXISTENCE AS SUCH .../IN HIS URGE TO RECORD HIS SURROUNDINGS BEFORE HE VANISHES, THE ARTIST CASTS A LAST, ALL-EMBRACING LOOK AT THE WORLD. AS THOUGH DEATH WERE ALREADY CLOSE AT HAND, HE IS EAGER TO REMEMBER FOR EVER WHAT HE SEES AND THE REPRESENTATION THEREFORE BECOMES RICHER THAN THE ORIGINAL. ART IS CREATED IN ORDER TO OVERCOME DEATH, BUT IN A STATE OF INTENSE EXPECTATION OF IT, IN THE LINGERING MOMENTS OF FAREWELL."

EDITOR: AND AGAIN WE FIND A SHORT, TOUCHING REMARK, DIRECTED AT HIS WIFE:

VOICE: "I OFTEN SIT DOWN TO A LETTER NOT BECAUSE I INTEND WRITING ANYTHING OF IMPORTANCE TO YOU, BUT JUST TO TOUCH A PIECE OF PAPER WHICH YOU WILL BE HOLDING IN YOUR HAND ..."

EDITOR: HOW DOES HE MANAGE, WITH FEW BOOKS AND SURROUNDED AS HE IS BY THE VICISSITUDES OF CAMP LIFE, TO LET HIS IMAGINATION ROAM?

VOICE: "IT IS INTERESTING WHEN YOUR MIND IS RESTRICTED TO A MINIMUM OF RESOURCES -- WHEN YOU HAVE NEITHER THE BOOKS YOU NEED, NOR THE STRENGTH OR MEANS TO CONSULT THEM. ALL YOU HAVE IS A FEW LINES, OR ONE LITTLE PICTURE, OR A SINGLE MUSICAL PHRASE -- AND YOU IMMERSE YOURSELF IN IT AND CLEANLY FORGET ALL ABOUT YOURSELF."

EDITOR: AND HOW DOES HE DEAL WITH THE CROWDED CONDITIONS OF HIS DAILY EXISTENCE?

VOICE: "THEY WRITE IN BOOKS AND MAGAZINES THAT EVERY MAN NEEDS SOME SPACE TO HIMSELF AND THAT IF YOU ARE CONSTANTLY SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE IT CAN MAKE YOU ILL. AUTOMATICALLY YOU LOWER A KIND OF INVISIBLE VEIL OVER YOUR EYES AND, WITH YOUR VISION BLURRED IN THIS MANNER, YOU LOOK BUT DO NOT SEE ..."

EDITOR: O  
P  
T. EVEN WHEN SINYAVSKY WRITES DIRECTLY ABOUT HIS WORK IN THE CAMP, HE APPLIES TO IT A WIDER MEANING. THUS, WHILE COMPLAINING THAT HE IS SLOW BUT THOROUGH IN HIS JOB OF POLISHING CHAIRS IN THE FURNITURE FACTORY, HE GOES ON:

VOICE: "A GOOD STYLE -- WHETHER IN WRITING OR IN CHAIR-MAKING --  
CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED THROUGH LACK OF SELF-ASSURANCE, AS  
I HAVE OBSERVED. A STYLIST IS USUALLY A VERY DIFFIDENT  
PERSON WHO TRIES TO COMPENSATE FOR HIS SENSE OF  
INADEQUACY BY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO EVERY WORD. A DIFFIDENT  
MAN CANNOT ALLOW HIMSELF TO WORK BADLY, IN SLIPSHOD  
FASHION -- AS A GENIUS CAN."

EDITOR: IN HIS FOURTH YEAR OF CAPTIVITY THE AUTHOR BEGINS TO HAVE  
DIFFICULTIES IN MAINTAINING HIS ALOOFNESS.

VOICE: "THE LANDSCAPE IS GRADUALLY BEGINNING TO LOOK LIKE STAGE  
SCENERY TO ME. I WAS WARNED THIS WOULD HAPPEN. SKY AND  
FOREST ARE NOTHING BUT PASTEBOARD IMITATIONS, AS I NOW  
NOTICE IN MY FOURTH YEAR. YET, DESPITE THIS, I AM, IF  
ANYTHING BECOMING MORE CHARITABLE, MORE SENTIMENTAL EVEN ...  
TO THINK HOW BEAUTIFUL THIS VERY SAME LANDSCAPE MIGHT SEEM  
IF ONE WISHED."

EDITOR: HOW TORTURED HIS SOUL HAS BECOME, IS EXPRESSED IN ONE  
SHORT SENTENCE:

VOICE: "I SHOULD WRITE SENTENCES AS LONG DRAIN-OUT AS SOBS, AND  
MATCH THE LENGTH OF THE DAYS BY THE PROLIXITY OF MY TEXT."

EDITOR: WE CAN ONLY GUESS WHAT IT TOOK THE AUTHOR TO TOLERATE  
CONSTANTLY BEING SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE WHEN HE WRITES:

VOICE: "DURING THESE YEARS I HAVE GROWN SO TIRED OF ALWAYS BEING  
WITH OTHER PEOPLE THAT SOMETIMES, WHEN I GO INTO OUR  
PART OF THE BARRACKS, MY BODY FEELS BLISS SURGING THROUGH  
IT PHYSICALLY, IN WAVES: THE PLACE IS EMPTY."

EDITOR: AND, FINALLY, IN THE LAST CHAPTER, SINYAVSKY REVEALS SOME OF HIS FEELINGS AFTER RETURNING TO FREEDOM.

VOICE: "THE MOST INTERESTING THING I HAVE EXPERIENCED DURING THESE FIRST DAYS AND WEEKS AFTER MY RELEASE HAS BEEN THE FEELING OF A DEAD MAN APPEARING AT HIS LIFE'S FEAST ... WHAT IS THE MOST PRECIOUS, THE MOST EXCITING SMELL WAITING FOR YOU IN THE HOUSE WHEN YOU RETURN TO IT AFTER HALF-A-DOZEN YEARS OR SO? THE SMELL OF ROSES, YOU THINK? NO, MOULDERING BOOKS ... IT'S QUITE BEYOND THEIR UNDERSTANDING THAT SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN IN A CAMP CAN FEEL SO ETERNALLY GRATEFUL -- FOR WHITE BREAD. AND FOR SOMETHING ELSE AS WELL: THAT NOBODY IS ANY LONGER BREATHING DOWN HIS NECK."

EDITOR: IN A MORE PHILOSOPHICAL VEIN, THE AUTHOR SUMS UP WHAT FREEDOM MEANS TO HIM IN THESE WORDS:

VOICE: "COMING OUT OF PRISON IS LIKE MAKING A POSTHUMOUS APPEARANCE IN THE WORLD. IT IS NOT LIKE BEING BORN AGAIN, BECAUSE ONE IS OLD AND WEAK, BUT MUCH WATER HAS FLOWED UNDER THE BRIDGES AND WE FIND IT ODD TO OBSERVE THAT TIME HAS CONTINUED TO PASS BY QUITE UNCONCERNED AND INDIFFERENT TO OUR ABSENCE ..."

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF AMERICA WEEKLY PROGRAM, FROM THE BOOKSHELF, IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY'S SELECTION WAS "A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS" BY ABRAM TERTZ. JOIN US AGAIN NEXT WEEK ... (AT THIS TIME) FOR ANOTHER SELECTION FROM THE BOOKSHELF. THIS IS -----.